

Gospel Rest for Depression: Symptoms, Causes, and Cure

Tom Maxham

I. Understanding the Experience

A. Believers and non-believers know the struggle with depression.

1. Many well-known believers such as Job, Elijah, King David, Jeremiah, Martin Luther, William Cowper, and Charles Spurgeon have suffered with depression. Psalm 88 end
2. An internet search quickly finds a very long list of famous, talented, or wealthy people who struggle with depression.
3. More can be done than we often ask or imagine for God's glory. Is 9:6; Jn 15:11; 16:21, 22, 24; Rom 15:13; Gal 5:22; Eph 3:20, 21; Phil 4:13; Col 1:23

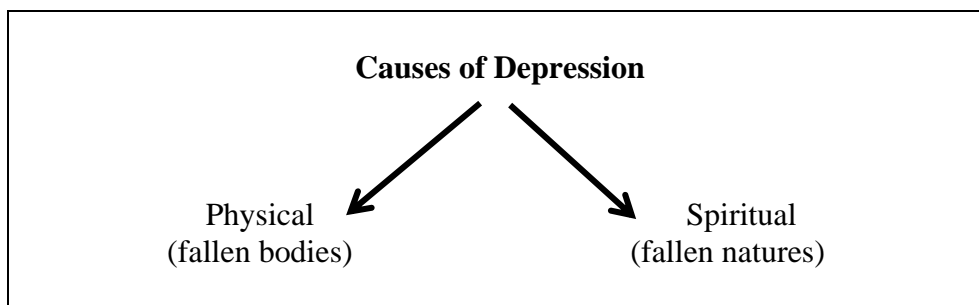
B. Physical and spiritual symptoms.

1. Symptoms range from mild to severe (there is typically a combination of physical and spiritual symptoms).
2. Physical symptom examples.
3. Spiritual symptom examples.

II. Physical and Spiritual Causes

A. There can be a combination of physical and spiritual causes.

1. The cause is due to fallen bodies and/or fallen natures.



2. There is an innate—physical and/or spiritual—predisposition to depression (which is much more pronounced in some people).

B. Physical causes of depression.

1. Physical cause may or may not be a factor.
2. Common physical causes of depression.
 - a. Side effect from medication.
 - b. A true medical problem can depress a person's mood; examples include (but are far from limited to):
 - 1) Cardiac failure, hypo or hyperthyroidism, hypoglycemia, and cancer.
 - 2) Infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, mononucleosis, and HIV.
 - 3) Brain and nervous system injury and disease such as Alzheimer's disease, multiple sclerosis, brain tumors, and stroke.
 - 4) Chronic pain from an illness or injury.
 - c. Use of illegal drugs.
 - d. The misuse of prescription medication or alcohol.
 - e. Poor dietary habits.
 - f. Nutritional deficiency.
 - g. An eating disorder.
 - h. Lack of physical exercise.
 - i. Sleep deprivation (e.g., from work, new baby, illegal drugs, medication misuse, poor sleeping habits).
 - j. Physical exhaustion from overworking (as the body affects the soul).

C. Spiritual causes of depression.

1. Spiritual causes are largely the cause of depression and can be the area where the most change occurs (even if there is a physical component).
2. Sin and guilt lead to depression.
3. Responding sinfully to: setbacks, hard circumstances, overwhelming obligations, disappointments, personal sins and failures, or other trials compound the original problem. Nm 11:15; 2 Sm 17:14, 23; 1 Kgs 19:3, 4; Pss 73:12, 13; 119:71, 75; Eccl 12:1-5; 2 Cor 4:8; Heb 12:7-11
4. A foundational spiritual cause is a *functional* unbelief in the truth of the Gospel for justification and satisfaction. Jer 17:5-8; Mt 11:28-30; 22:36-40

III. Counseling the Depressed Person

A. A friendship or pastoral relationship is needed.

1. A long-term counseling relationship can be anticipated and can give hope.

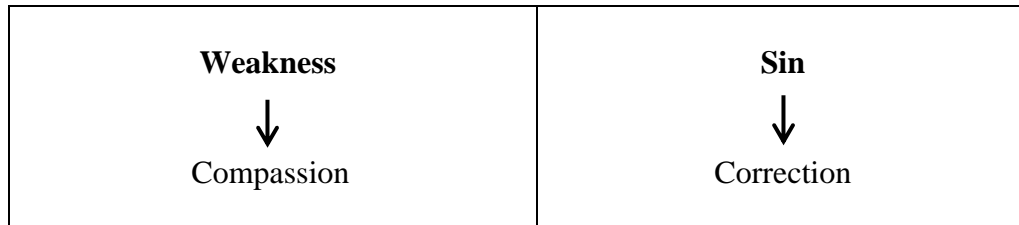
2. Before teaching and correcting, understand the person's experience and feelings.
Ps 103:14; Rom 2:4; 12:15; Heb 4:15
3. Help in practical ways.

B. Gather data to understand the situation and cause (or causes).

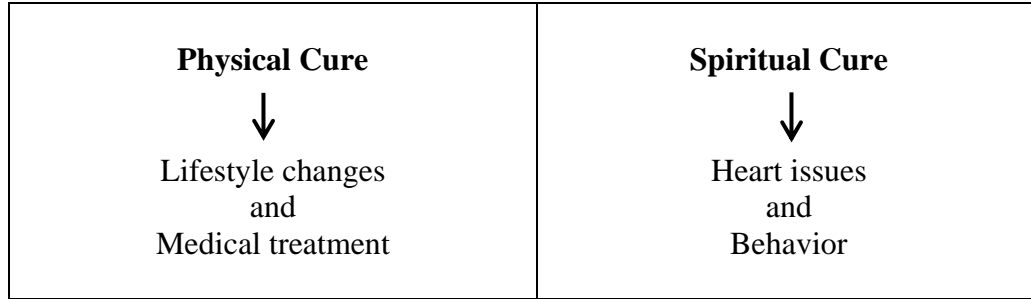
1. Identify or rule out normal sadness (determining if the sadness is appropriate due to a real loss).
2. Get an understanding of the type, severity, and history or pattern of the symptoms.
3. Identify if there is a physical causes and all spiritual causes.
4. Are there antidepressants or psychotropic medications being taken? For how long?
5. Listen carefully for counselee heart issues (law keeping and idols of the heart) and ask heart (diagnostic) questions such as:¹ Prv 20:5

C. Identify and distinguish between physical weaknesses and sinful violations of Scripture.

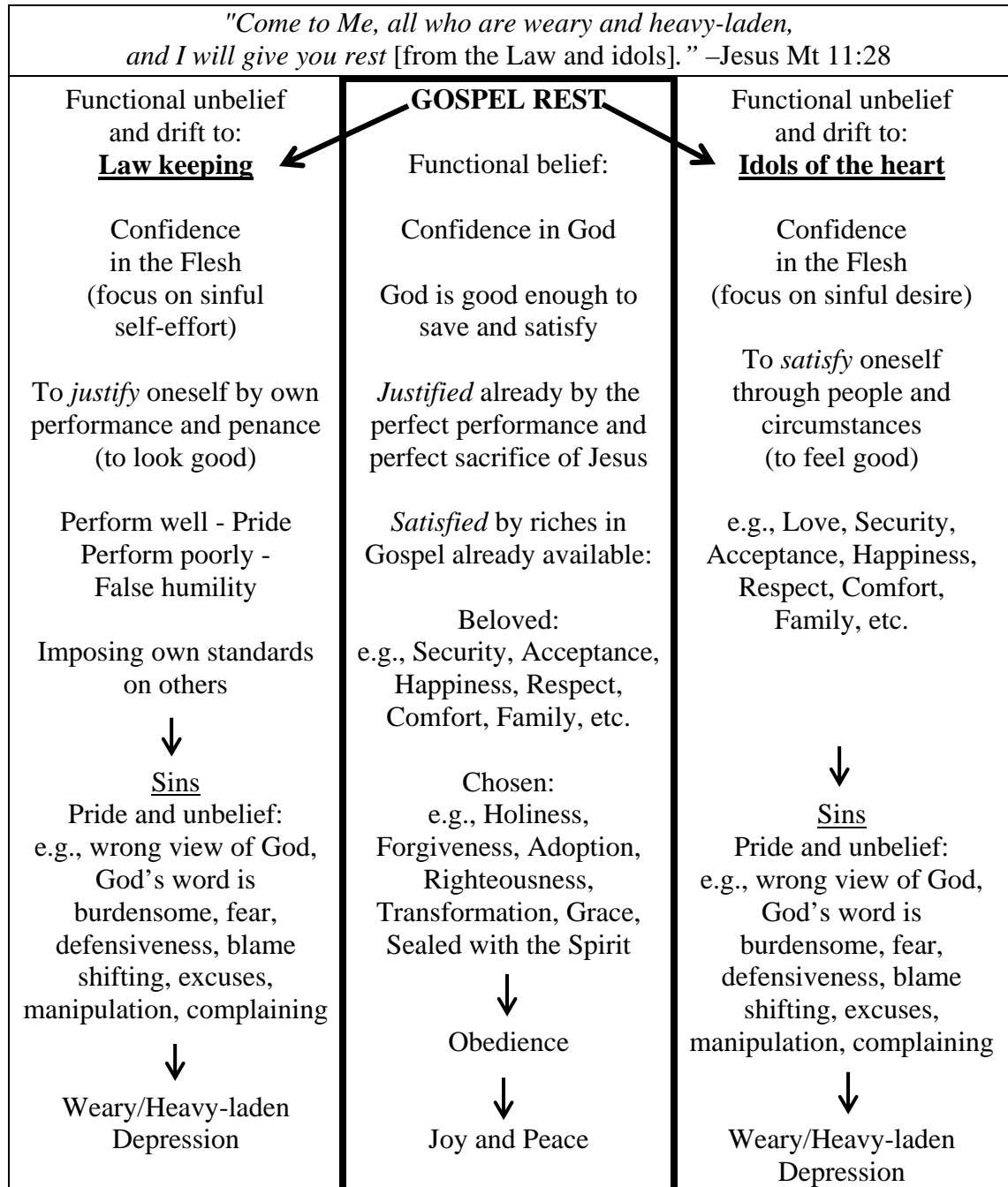
1. Having great compassion for any physical weakness.
2. At the same time, not excusing violations of Scripture as anything the Bible commands or prohibits is a spiritual issue and not a weakness. 1 Cor 10:13



¹ Questions on PowerPoint developed by Ed Welch.

D. Physical cure and spiritual cure.

1. Physical cure—address the physical causes, if any. 1 Kgs 19:4-6
 - a. Lifestyle changes may be needed.
 - 1) Vitamin D, other vitamins, megavitamins, or other supplements for any deficiency (nutritionist recommendations and coordinated with the health care provider if prescription medication is being taken).
 - 2) Tied to an improved diet (including weight loss or gain, if needed).
 - 3) Make changes hindering adequate sleep of 7-8 hours per night to refresh the mind and body.
 - 4) Regular physical exercise (e.g., daily vigorous walk and weekly longer hike).
 - a) Be uplifted with the natural occurring chemicals God has provided.
 - b) Sunlight exposure may be a side benefit.
 - 5) Increase rest and reduce excessive activities and obligations (e.g., work hours or work demands, too many children’s activities).
 - 6) Stop the use of illegal drugs, or misuse of prescription medication or alcohol.
 - b. Medical treatment as may be indicated.
 - 1) Medical examination for multiple possible physical causes to be identified or ruled out.
 - 2) Evaluate medication side effects (needed change or change in dosage).
 - 3) Physical therapy for post-surgery or injury care.
2. Spiritual cure—the Gospel is always needed for spiritual causes. Ps 130:3, 4; Jer 17:5-8; Mt 11:28-30; Jn 15:5 Rom 1:15, 16; 2 Cor 4:7-10
3. Remember one’s identity in the Gospel.
 - a. Sinner first (deeply humble about oneself) Rom 5:6-10
AND
 - b. Beloved by God (deeply confident in God) because of Jesus. Jn 15:9;
Heb 13:5b, 6; 1 Pt 5:6, 7
4. Preach to oneself (from the still small voice in God’s word). Pss 42:5, 11; 43
5. Rest *from* misplaced hope in the Law and idols; and rest *in* the Gospel. Mt 11:28



All believers, to one extent or another, are functionally misplacing hope in their own law keeping for justification or in idols of their heart for satisfaction. Functioning too long in this way leads to spiritual depression. They need to turn daily from the misplaced hope and place their hope in the love of God expressed in Jesus and the Gospel for the lifting of depression and the fruit of joy and peace.

6. Rest from striving to functionally keep the Law to justify oneself (pharisaical works-righteousness in all of us). Ps 46:10; Rom 8:3, 4; Gal 2:16
7. Rest in the Gospel (God is good enough to *save!*).

8. Rest from striving for idols of the heart to ultimately satisfy (e.g., love, security, acceptance, happiness, respect, comfort, family). Ps 46:10; Jer 17:5, 6
9. Rest in the Gospel (God is good enough to *satisfy!*).
10. Rest in that which truly satisfies and can never be taken away. Isa 55:2
11. There will be a combination of functionally placing hope for justification *and* satisfaction outside of the Gospel.
12. Additional biblical thinking is needed in all areas of life.
13. Confess sins to a compassionate God. Ps 32:5, 11; Prv 28:13; Heb 4:16; 1 Jn 1:8, 9
14. Put off sin and put on righteousness (actively) and God changes the desires (passively). Eph 4:22-24
15. Move out in joyful and peaceful obedience empowered by the Gospel.

E. Key biblical texts for depression.

1. 1 Kings 19:1-10; Nehemiah 2:3; Psalms 32:3, 4, 11; 42:5, 11; 43; 73; 88; Proverbs 18:14; Jeremiah 17:5-8; Matthew 4:3, 4; 6:19-34; 11:28-30; John 15:9-11; Romans 1:15, 16; 5:1, 2; 8:3, 4; 9:1, 2; 1 Corinthians 10:13, 14; 2 Corinthians 4:7-10; Galatians 5:22, 23; Ephesians 4:20-24; 6:10-17; Colossians 1:23; Hebrews 13:5b, 6; and 1 Peter 5:6, 7.
2. The declarations of what God has done (indicatives) and commands as to what the believer is to do (imperatives) of Scripture are both needed for change—but a key point is to *start with and emphasize* the indicatives.

F. Accepting that not all symptoms go away in this life can be helpful.

1. Believers may have to endure, but are blessed for it. Ps 88; 2 Cor 4:8; Jam 5:11
2. They look to Christ's return for their ultimate hope. Jam 5:7, 8
3. At the resurrection our bodies and minds will be fully redeemed. 1 Cor 15:42
4. Abide under a trial as the believer's life does not have to be torn apart in a trial.

G. Suicide needs to be discussed early in the counseling.

1. Ask if the counselee is having suicidal thoughts. 2 Sm 17:23; Jon 4:3
2. Ask if *planning* to commit suicide.

- a. If so, ask the method and details of the plan.
- b. Put in place and maintain all responsible precautions.

IV. Homework (See Attachment 1).

V. Resources

A. Books (Gospel and depression)

1. *Because He Loves Me: How Christ Transforms Our Daily Life*, Elyse Fitzpatrick.
2. *Commentary on Galatians*, Martin Luther.
3. *Counsel from the Cross: Connecting Broken People to the Love of Christ*, Elyse Fitzpatrick and Dennis Johnson.
4. *Depression: Looking Up From the Stubborn Darkness*, Edward Welch.
5. *Good Mood, Bad Mood: Help and Hope for Depression and Bipolar Disorder*, Charles Hodges, M.D.
6. *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Its Cures*, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones.
7. *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith*, Tim Keller.
8. *The Discipline of Grace: God's Role and Our Role in the Pursuit of Holiness*, Jerry Bridges.
9. *The Transforming Power of the Gospel*, Jerry Bridges.
10. *Who Am I? Identity in Christ*, Jerry Bridges.
11. *When the Darkness Will Not Lift: Doing What We Can While We Wait for God—and Joy*, John Piper.

B. Book chapters (depression)

1. *Blame It On the Brain: Distinguishing Chemical Imbalances, Brain Disorders, and Disobedience*, Edward Welch. See Chapter 7, “Depression.”

2. *Men Counseling Men: A Biblical Guide to the Major Issues Men Face*, John Street. See Chapter 6, “Men and Depression,” by Robert Somerville.

C. Booklet (depression)

Depression: The Way Up When You Are Down, Edward Welch. RCL booklet.

D. Devotionals books (Gospel)

1. *A Gospel Primer for Christians: Learning to See the Glories of God’s Love*, Milton Vincent.
2. *Comforts from the Cross: Celebrating the Gospel One Day at a Time*, Elyse Fitzpatrick.
3. *Comforts from Romans: Celebrating the Gospel One Day at a Time*, Elyse Fitzpatrick.

E. Audios and outlines (Gospel and depression)

1. “Seeing Your Justification Clearly,” Milton Vincent, 6/26/11, www.grcbible.org.
<http://www.grcbible.org/2011/06/26/seeing-your-justification-clearly>.
2. The Basics of Biblical Counseling, “Depression,” Jim Newheiser. www.ibcd.org.
<http://www.ibcd.org/resources/messages/17-depression>.

VI. Conclusion